FARMING SECTOR EXPERIENCE IN UTILITIES

Final report

April 2026



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BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

01

BACKGROUND

The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (Utility Regulator, also referred to as UR) commissioned Ipsos to conduct research to explore the relationship between the farming sector in Northern Ireland and the utilities sector, along with the associated challenges.



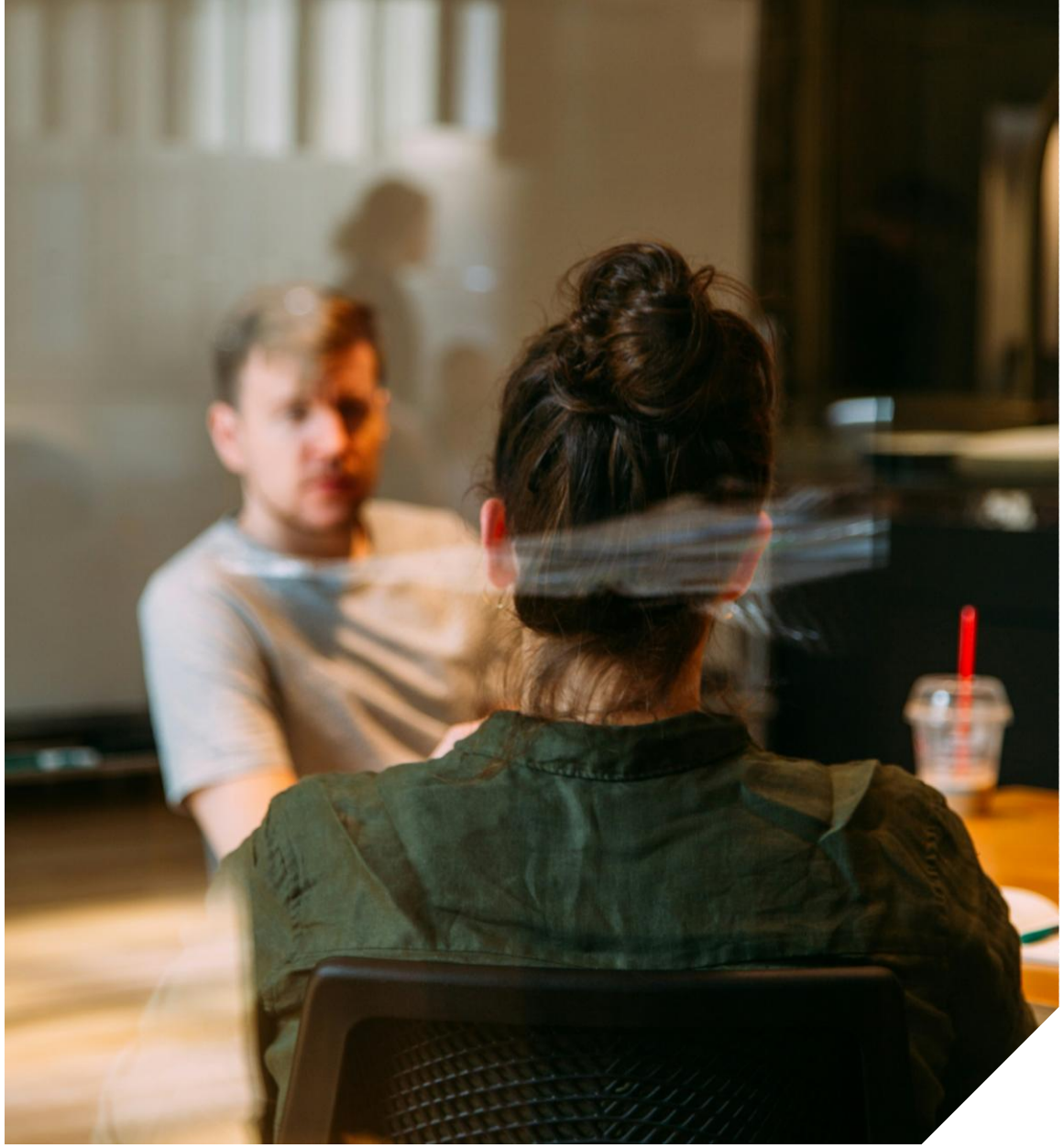
METHODOLOGY

A total of 36 depth interviews were conducted with farmers across Northern Ireland between 20th January and 26th February 2026.

Participants were recruited using Ipsos' trusted recruitment partner Fieldmouse, using participants from their Opinion Harvester panel, a verified UK farmer panel which has reach within Northern Ireland. Additional free-find recruitment was employed to supplement this.

All interviews were completed via Microsoft Teams or telephone and lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

The findings, as with all qualitative research findings, are not intended to be representative of farmers in Northern Ireland – instead, it is intended to provide depth and insight into their experiences, the critical nature of utilities to their livelihoods and the existing and potential barriers to investment on their farms.



METHODOLOGY

Table: Profile of fieldwork interviews

Farm type	
Beef	8
Beef and other (Sheep, Pigs or Arable)	6
Cattle, sheep and crops	1
Dairy	9
Dairy and other (Barley, some crops)	3
Mixed (Livestock, cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry, arable)	5
Poultry/pigs	1
Sheep	1
Sheep and suckler cows	2
TOTAL	**36**

Region	
Antrim	9
Armagh	6
Derry/Londonderry	3
Down	6
Fermanagh	4
Tyrone	8
TOTAL	**36**

Farm size	
Very small	19
Small	9
Medium	5
Large	3
TOTAL	**36**

CASE STUDIES

Throughout the report, we have included 6 case studies which aim to highlight individual experiences with the energy and water sectors. The case studies are designed to be illustrative and therefore are not necessarily reflective of the wider farming population, or the interviews conducted.

Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.



Suzanne

Experience with switching energy provider



Bruce

Experience with Supplier A and NIE Networks



Jill

Experience with NI Water



John

Experience with NI Water



Bob

Experience with NIE Networks and renewables



Jane

Experience with renewables and Rural Development Scheme

VIEWS ON ENERGY

02

It works. We've already got electric, so we don't use gas or anything like that. Yeah, there's not really much you can say about it. The lights come on, everything works.
Dairy farm, Antrim

Experiences with energy provision varied, but expectation centres on a reliable energy supply

Farmers' views were typically shaped by the source of energy needed for a farm's operations and the extent to which there had been any significant issues in supply.

Farmers generally had an expectation that energy will arrive to their premises without any interruptions or issues and that billing should be straightforward and accurate.

Farmers who were more positive typically reported low impacts of energy supply interruptions. Where farmers were more negative, they cited a range of issues which caused this, including extreme weather (which sometimes led to damage to infrastructure), or billing and communication problems.

There was a direct impact on farms for those who had experienced such issues, often leading to interruptions to energy or water supply. Whether farmers had a positive experience or not, was driven by how quickly and efficiently the issue was resolved.

Price changes in energy were spontaneously mentioned, with energy frequently described as ‘expensive’

Farmers felt the financial impact from the increase in energy prices over the last few years, particularly from 2022, but did not feel they had any control over this – so reluctantly accepted the higher bills. Increased energy bills were not the only financial challenge facing farmers. They also discussed increases to other key areas of their operations including petrol and diesel, certain types of machinery, fertiliser, animal feed and bedding which meant increased energy prices compounded the wider financial pressure on farms, particularly smaller farms.

While farmers wanted to see reduced costs, they did not often cite examples of changes in farming operations to achieve this. Most farmers did not consider it feasible to change how they ran their operations, despite identifying inefficient processes such as outdated electric heating systems, 24-hour camera systems and milking systems. They pointed to the cost of upgrades and the downtime required to make changes, as farms often need equipment to run day and night.

A few farmers did make direct changes to their farms to reduce running costs – these included upgrades to lighting or machinery to more energy efficient alternatives or installing renewable technologies. These changes were part of wider renewable energy goals for some farms, with lower energy costs being cited as a direct result of having made such changes.

> *[Energy prices have] definitely gone up a lot, but everyone is experiencing that. I wouldn’t say it’s caused us to use any less because we need to use what we need to use.*
> **Dairy farm, Antrim**

> *Obviously, the price increases in recent years ... I do feel the electricity has gone up, maybe a faster rate than you would like. But I mean that's life, isn't it?*
> **Beef farm, Tyrone**

Farmers' Case Study 1: Suzanne*



Suzanne runs a very small beef farm in County Armagh. She is concerned about **the financial strain of rising energy costs and was frustrated at sharp price increases in recent years. Suzanne generally 'shops around' to find the best deals with energy suppliers but** switched to [Supplier C] a few years ago and has been satisfied with the supplier.

The switching process was 'seamless' and while it took several weeks to complete – which had not been expected – **she has been happy with the price and the customer service she receives.**

**Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.*



Suzanne felt that increases in energy prices had been 'excessive' in the past few years, and that this greatly reduced her margin, which in turn meant she has less funds available to reinvest in the farm.

There's only so much income I can generate and it's dictated. I can't say to the abattoir, I need an extra £100 because my electricity went up by £100.....If that margin keeps decreasing, well then there's other things on the farm I just can't do. I don't have the money to do it.

Over the years, she had switched between a number of different electricity providers to ensure she was getting the best deal possible – she also valued customer service when deciding which supplier to move to.



I've been with a few different providers. Price and service will mainly dictate who I go to. I've been with [Supplier A], I've been with [Supplier C].... I've never been with the likes of [Supplier D] I find [them] very, very expensive.



Suzanne switched to [Supplier C] for her electricity supply on the farm a few years ago. She had expected the switching process to take less than a week, but in reality, this took several weeks.

I kind of thought it would be done and sorted within maybe a few days, a week at most. But I think it took two to three weeks. But whenever it changed, it was seamless, it was fine. There was no stoppage in power or anything like that.

Since the change in provider, Suzanne has not experienced any issues. She indicated that while she does not have a lot of communication with [Supplier C], she has found them to be proactive and efficient and believes they provide the most competitive rate. They provide regular reminders for Suzanne to renew her contract when she nears the end of her term, which she finds helpful.



I have been with them for a few years, and I don't have an issue with them . They contact me every year to sign me into a new contract....they would contact me another 3 or 4 times to say, 'look we have another 2 or 4 weeks to get signed up otherwise you'll be into a higher price bracket', so they're very good...I find they're very prompt. Very efficient. So far, I [have] found the best price. Service wise, I've had no issues.

Despite high energy costs, most farmers have been reluctant to switch supplier

Some farmers felt that despite ensuring they were employing efforts to be as energy efficient as possible, energy prices were always going to be high as they typically need to be operating 24/7 and there was 'only so much they could do'. Farmers who did not switch typically cited risk aversion, a lack of choice and high prices across all suppliers. Some were also satisfied with the customer service they received, even those on very high tariffs.

Although most farmers remained with the same supplier over many years, those who did switch saw reduced costs when they switched to new electricity suppliers. Among those who had switched, some had sought lower tariffs or more competitive deals, and others had been contacted by suppliers to encourage them to switch. Farmers typically switched between the larger electricity suppliers in Northern Ireland. Some also discussed switching to other energy suppliers when they offered the lowest tariffs and made the switching process hassle-free.

Competitive pricing was not the only driver of switching, as some farmers highlighted that in addition to high bills, they had also experienced poor customer service. For some, poor customer service increased motivation to switch if a farmer was already considering changing energy supplier due to price, particularly if the farmer felt that their existing supplier did not have a good understanding of the farming sector.

> *The number of suppliers in Northern Ireland is too low. And I think the price reflects the number of suppliers, basically. You know, the less suppliers, the more that they can charge.*
> **Beef farm, Armagh**

> *We left [Supplier B]. They got far too dear. And they weren't built for farms. They couldn't speak the language as such.*
> **Dairy farm, Fermanagh**

Offers come in all the time from different providers to change. We're probably a bit risk averse....it all just seems a bit complicated, and we'll probably just shy away from even entertaining [switching] too much.

Beef farm, Down

Straightforward billing and communication is expected, and when issues arise this leads to frustration

Most farmers felt they had little relationship with their supplier beyond billing. However, they expected this and saw it as a reflection of good service delivery without issues. Some farmers talked positively about straightforward billing processes, citing clear statements, easy direct debit options and reminders in advance of upcoming billing cycles.

Farmers who experienced metering and billing issues became frustrated when these were not resolved quickly, or when a lack of communication caused further confusion or uncertainty about their bills.

Some farmers highlighted poor communication from suppliers and administrative metering errors which led to billing errors. Challenging meter readings or estimates added burden and frustration, as well as causing cash flow issues for their businesses.

Some farmers wanted to see more proactive communication from suppliers. This would remind them to review their service ahead of key dates, such as upcoming billing cycles or the end of annual contracts.

> *They're straightforward and not complicated and I don't really have to do much beyond pay them.*
> **Dairy farm, Tyrone**

> *I think the only thing I need to watch with them is the monthly billing and if I don't submit meter readings, their estimates seem to be quite on the high side.*
> **Dairy farm, Down**

> *[Supplier B] were pretty awful at the start. They took all my details down wrong. And the first contact I had from them was to say they were going to cancel [my contract].*
> **Livestock, Arable and Poultry farm, Fermanagh**

I have to give them their due. If there is ever a problem, with the lines [Supplier A] are usually pretty quick and out in all weathers to get it sorted.
Sheep farm, Antrim

Experience? Middling, non existent. Like it's just where you pay a bill and that's it.
Dairy farm, Antrim

Quality of service and timely issue resolution positively influenced farmers' views of suppliers

Farmers had varied experiences with energy suppliers. When they had no issues or felt neutral about their energy provision, they believed the service worked as it should. When issues were resolved quickly by NIE Networks after being reported to suppliers — for example, the repair of electrical lines or poles — farmers remained satisfied with their service.

Farmers valued customer advisers who understood the technicalities of the farming sector and their unique challenges. They wanted to see more of this tailored support across all utility providers (NIE Networks, NI Water and individual energy suppliers).

Those who had switched suppliers and experienced different levels of service felt this most strongly. Farmers also valued having dedicated account managers as a direct point of contact for any issues.

Farmers praised NIE Networks' responsiveness but highlighted infrastructure and connection challenges

Farmers were generally positive about NIE Networks and the service they received. Timely responses to damaged infrastructure, such as electrical poles, and helpful staff drove this satisfaction. Farmers particularly praised NIE Networks' prompt response times during extreme weather, as well as individual staff members or field managers who provided updates and maintained close communication.

Farmers with more negative views of NIE Networks had experienced specific issues, such as delayed maintenance following severe storms and challenges establishing new connections, particularly for renewable energy sources.

Farmers highlighted the cost of connecting to the grid as a key challenge. This applied to renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind turbines, as well as standard electricity for new farm buildings. Some farmers also experienced issues with aging or inadequate infrastructure, such as electrical poles or transformers which affected power supply reliability and capacity for upgrades.



> *Their field manager, she was very handy to deal with...she was more than helpful.*
> **Dairy farm, Antrim**

> *We have multiple poles through our fields, where the wires are too low, we can't get machinery under them....we can't get [NIE Networks] to sort them out.*
> **Dairy and Barley farm, Tyrone**

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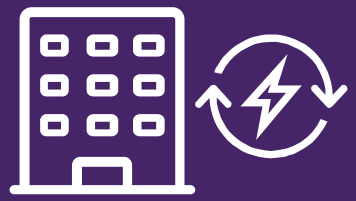
Farmers' Case Study 2: Bruce*



Bruce runs a very small dairy farm in County Antrim. His experience with both Supplier A as a supplier and NIE Networks as an operator have been very positive. This was due to **the ease of communication from both Supplier A and NIE Networks; the Economy 7 rate he receives from the supplier and the engagement he had with NIE Networks.**

He recalled positive experiences with local "on the ground" NIE Networks operators who helped fix poles that had been damaged in the storms. Although he did highlight people in the area were critical because they were without power for longer, he greatly appreciated the work the operator had done.

**Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.*



The farmer was positive with their experience of Supplier A and has had no issues in dealing with them as a supplier. They are easy to get in touch with, and they reply to questions or any fault reports that are identified

> *We've had no issues with them [Supplier A] at all whatsoever. It's handy enough to either ring up or go onto the website and fill in the form if you've got a fault or anything like that. And they're pretty good at getting that sorted out. I suppose that reverts back to NIE Networks owning all the infrastructure. So, yeah, they're pretty good at getting it sorted.*

He was positive about the Economy 7 tariff which he uses on his premises. This tariff reduced cost of energy rate offered by Supplier A for using energy at off-peak times – which benefits farms like his, which have to run operations 24/7. The financial benefit of this offer was one of the key reasons he had not switched from Supplier A.



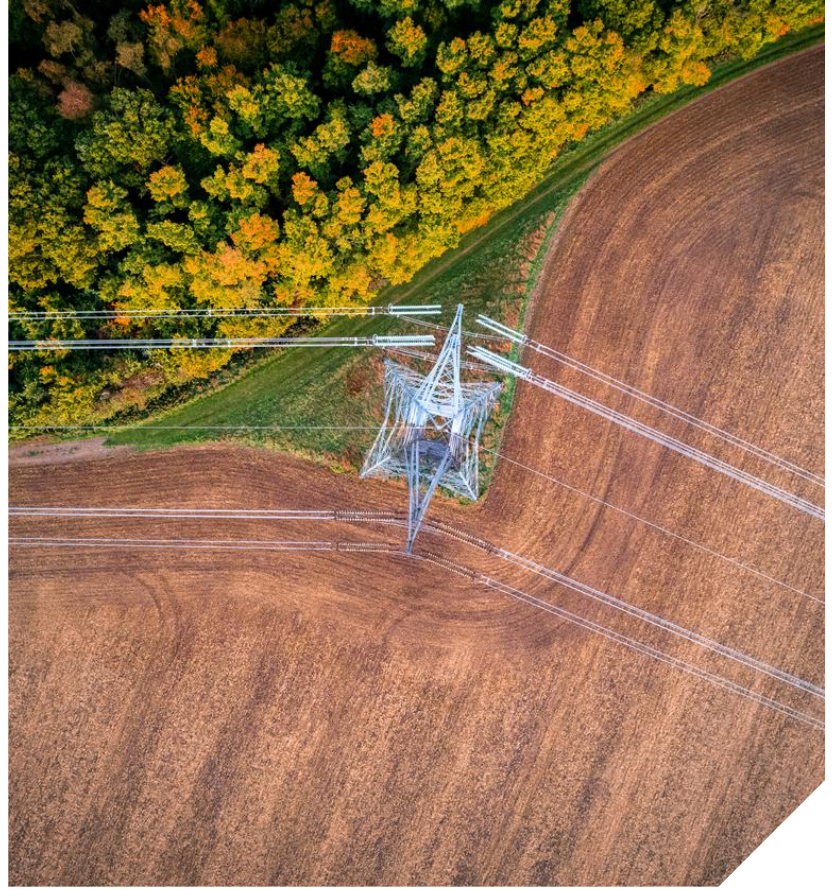
> *I suppose for our own perspective, we use quite a lot of Economy 7. So, they still operate the Economy 7 tariff or whatever it's called now. ... whereas quite a lot of the newer companies don't have that or not as good a rate. Which is why, like we've looked at switching a few times just because some of the daytime rates are cheaper, but when it comes down to it financially doesn't work out.*

The farmer praised the "on the ground" operators from NIE Networks and the work they had done during the storms to get power restored to different premises.



> *[NIE Networks are] Brilliant. Really, really good. There's like a couple of local [NIE Networks] guys during the storms last winter they set up like a Facebook group. So you were able just to go on and say , like there's a line down or there's a pole down or whatever. And they were absolutely fantastic.*

Understanding of NIE Networks' current role as Distribution Network Operator (DNO) varied



Awareness of NIE Networks' current role was mixed – while farmers sometimes recognised them as an organisation, a small number confused NIE Networks with their energy supplier, or the organisation that supplied their bill.

In some cases, farmers contacted NIE Networks to report something that was the responsibility of the electricity supplier rather than the DNO, for example, a billing or metering issue. Farmers sometimes referred to NIE Networks and their supplier interchangeably. Some did acknowledge that their supplier was the electricity supplier rather than the network operator, however, it was evident that prior knowledge or experience with the former 'Northern Ireland Electricity' may have confused farmers as to the role of their DNO and the role – and operating name – of their electricity supplier.

More commonly, farmers contacted NIE Networks to report structural damage to equipment on their land, or to pursue the installation of new electricity connections.

> *We phoned NIE [Networks]. Oh no, you have to get in touch with your supplier. There just seems to be an awful lot of admin doing nothing.*
> **Dairy farm, Down**

> *I contacted them through their call out number, issue number. And they, yeah, there's a very useful guy on the other end of the phone.*
> **Equine, sheep and arable farm, Down**

VIEWS ON WATER

03

Water provision is critical to farm operations, with a range of water provision across farms



All farmers interviewed underlined the importance of water for their operations. Farmers highlighted that losing access to water, even for a few hours, there would be an immediate and direct impact on their operations, with serious consequences for livestock as well as the cleaning and running of equipment. Most farmers indicated that interruptions lasting beyond two to three hours were problematic, and any interruption beyond a day would have a significant impact.

Farmers typically used either the public supply provided by NI Water or their own on-site water supplies (such as boreholes) – although some had a mixture of both private and public water supplies. Those who relied on the public system remained satisfied as long as their service was uninterrupted. Some farmers used private water supplies or boreholes to independently manage their needs and maintain a continuous supply, as outages caused severe disruptions. Private supplies were also necessary when a farm could not connect to NI Water's network or had high water demands requiring an additional source.

> *We use [the] mains water supply and then we also have a spring borehole on the farm.*
> **Beef and sheep farm, Antrim**

> *I don't even have [an] NI Water mains supply....it just wouldn't touch the volume I use. There's absolutely no way the mains water supply would keep me up on water.*
> **Poultry/Pig farm, Armagh**

There’s 200 head of livestock there that need water….if we don’t have running water, you know, for more than two or three hours, we’re in problems.

Beef farm, Down

Farmers rely heavily on water, meaning the impact of any supply interruptions is significant

It was clear that some farms could not operate without water. Farmers relied so heavily on water for livestock care and equipment cleaning that supply interruptions were often more detrimental to daily operations than power outages.

While farmers reported infrequent interruptions to water supply or pressure, these outages had a significant impact. They forced farmers to act quickly to protect animal welfare and provide alternative water sources. Farmers with private supplies also faced limitations when outages lasted beyond a few hours or stretched into a couple of days. Backup water storage from water tanks could only last so long, and in extreme weather, borehole pumps used to extract water from wells could also be impacted by power outages.

Farmers who used boreholes or other water storage solutions as a backup supply noted that these sources were sometimes unreliable or inefficient, particularly when there was an interruption to the mains water supply. During extended interruptions, boreholes could not always sustain a farm's needs. Extreme weather and power cuts also affected the pumps used to extract water, highlighting farms' strong reliance on both uninterrupted energy and water.

Farmers also reported experiencing low water pressure. They explained that very low pressure affected productivity by interrupting automated systems, such as dairy processes. In some instances, pressure was so low that water could not reach certain fields. Leaks presented another challenge; farmers found them difficult to detect and manage, often resulting in unexpectedly high bills. They wanted to see NI Water support farmers to manage these instances better – including pausing billing until the leak was resolved.

> *The pressure was so low that it wasn't going to certain fields, and it wasn't coming through at all at different stages.*
> **Dairy farm, Down**

> *If you do have a leak, maybe that NI Water aren't billing you this big bill until they do a further investigation and actually look into it.*
> **Sheep and suckler cow farm, Tyrone**

Farmers' Case Study 3: Jill*



Jill runs a medium beef and sheep farm in County Tyrone. She has experienced low water pressure on the farm over a number of years, during periods where the farm uses a high volume of water for the cattle.

Overall, Jill was positive about her experiences with NI Water. This was due to **good communication and the 'professionalism' of NI Water staff** when she was getting a new water connection on the premises.

**Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.*

The farmer highlighted that water is crucial to her farming operation and the negative impact that a loss of water could have.

[Water] is extremely important. If we don't have water, then our cattle can't get water.....especially this time of year, you know, the cattle are all in the sheds, they're all using the drinkers and there [are] big water bills this time of year.

The farmer highlighted that they have experienced low water pressure over the past 10 years. However, this is during times when the cattle are fed, which the farmer understood to have an impact on the water pressure across the farm.

We find in the evening time when we're feeding the cattle and the cattle are drinking more water...the pressure [on] the whole farm goes down...Over the years, 10 plus years. There's not enough pressure coming into the farm.

Despite some challenges with water pressure, Jill was pleased overall with her experiences with NI Water. She explained that when a new water connection was installed on the farm, she felt the communication, professionalism and staff led to a smooth and hassle-free process.

We had to get a new connection, and it was all done very professionally and everyone's [kept] to time and they kept the dates and everything. So, you know, we couldn't fault them at all. The staff are excellent. You know, we paid for it [the connection], and it all worked well....they [NI Water] consulted on where exactly we wanted the line to come in onto that bit of the farm.

Experiences with NI Water varied, although a need for more proactive communication was consistent

Views on NI Water were mixed. Farmers who were positive about NI Water pointed to clear and hassle-free communication, or interruptions to supply that were resolved quickly. This was similar to their expectations around energy provision.

Those who viewed NI Water more negatively highlighted the slow responses to system leaks, as water supply interruptions harmed operations and some explicitly linked them to increased water bills. Farmers would often be unaware of a leak on their farm as it could be invisible, for example, underground. As farmers' mains water usage is metered, the amount of water used would be detected, which would then reflect on their bill. Billing inconsistencies and anomalies as a result of leaks reduced customer satisfaction.

Farmers sometimes struggled to reach the right person within NI Water and felt that they were passed to multiple customer advisors when calling their contact centre. More generally, they felt that improved communication was needed with farmers, and that customer advisors could be upskilled to be more knowledgeable on the issues affecting the farming sector e.g., there could be a dedicated farm team. Depending on the farming operations, some of the issues involving water described by farmers can be complex, and they wanted more proactive support, taking these issues into consideration. Leaks that were difficult to detect were a key example of a more complex issue, as farmers needed NI Water to support them to locate the leak to better understand the volume of water being lost.

As NI Water are the only public supplier of water in Northern Ireland, some farmers highlighted that this leaves customers with no choice of water provider, and unable to control the price they pay for water.

> *It comes down to communication with farmers. Get somebody that comes out and asks, 'You know what, if we can do something for you in the next five years, what would you like us to do?'*
>
> **Arable and Dairy farm, Derry/L'Derry**

> *The first I became aware of [the leak] was whenever I got a bill for over £1100…I had to phone NI Water and they had to come out and trace [the leak]….if the meter was running excessively, why did they not contact me before?*
>
> **Beef farm, Armagh**

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Farmers' Case Study 4: John*



John runs a very small beef and sheep farm in County Antrim. His experience with NI Water has been 'very, very poor', thanks to various challenges, including a **prolonged interruption to his water supply**, **damage to property following maintenance works,** and **issues with metering**.

He once had a water outage lasting 16 hours, meaning he had to provide alternate water sources to livestock during the summer months. Reflecting on the incident he felt that NI Water did not offer sufficient support such as an emergency callout or an offer of an alternative water supply.

**Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.*



The farmer highlighted the significance of water in his operations and the impact any loss of water can have to his farm

Livestock relies on [water] all year round and without water, well, we couldn't operate.

When a new water main was installed on the farmer's land, he stated that the old main was removed, leaving him without water – or an alternate water supply - for 16 hours. He was extremely frustrated at the lack of support when he called NI Water for help.



They basically said there was nothing they really could do. There wasn't even the offer of the use of a bowser or a supply of water, or emergency team to come out.



Other incidents with maintenance works on his land left the farmer unhappy about the way contractors working for NI Water acted on his property. He felt that these individuals should be trained on procedures when working on farms.

They seem to think they have a right to enter your property without your permission....And another thing was about was if there was any damage done, they denied it and yet we knew blatantly it was them and their staff had done the damage.

The farmer shared that he has two meters on his property and felt he should be paying a lower standing charge for the second meter.



You don't mind paying for your water. Everybody understands that the water is a necessity. But when you're made pay for 2 meters...If you're paying full price for 1 meter, you should be paying maybe a third of the price for the second.

KEY IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

04

Key identified challenges and barriers

There were a number of key challenges for farmers, which largely related to energy costs and the ability to make changes to their current operations.

Farmers of all farm types and sizes were concerned about **further utility price rises in the future**, particularly electricity costs. Farmers felt that they need to stay competitive and therefore cannot increase the price they charge for their products, which adds further financial strain. With higher energy costs, some also highlighted that they have less capital for investment in new technologies or the growth of their business.

> *As soon as the likes of energy price goes up, my margin is decreased.*
> **Beef farm, Armagh**

There was a shared concern about improvements needed to infrastructure for both the water system and the electricity grid. Farmers feel that the infrastructure for both energy and water in Northern Ireland is outdated and should be upgraded to safeguard against the effects of extreme weather and increasing demands on the systems. Grid pressure and interruptions to water supply are felt to be key issues affecting the agricultural sector more acutely than other industries due to their reliance on energy and water.

> *Given the storms that we've been having lately, if we have a big power outage through the winter, there is a big issue. [NIE Networks] really need to be stepping up and getting these supplies and these lines up to date and up to scratch.*
> **Beef farm, Down**

Key identified challenges and barriers

Communication with providers was often cited as a challenge among farmers who sometimes struggled to reach the right person to report issues with their water or electricity supply. This was particularly frustrating when farmers had a time-sensitive issue such as damage to property or interruptions to water or power supplies, when they had an issue which would impact on billing e.g., a water leak, or if they wanted more information on renewable installation.

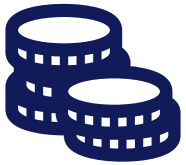
A general lack of knowledge on available support among farmers was a challenge, with more information on available financial support for increasing costs needed. There was an appetite for any financial support that could be provided through grants.

> *I would say [NI Water] are not as bad as NIE Networks, but again it's the same [problem]. You're into the call centre and then nobody knows anything...and then you have to wait for somebody to phone you back.*
> **Dairy and crop farm, Tyrone**

> *I should be able to go to NIE [Networks] and say, 'Look, I'm thinking of putting in solar to reduce your grid demand' and I should be getting help or encouraged and facilitated to make things easier, to help them hit their own renewable targets.*
> **Dairy farm, Antrim**

Despite a strong appetite for renewable technologies, there are a number of perceived barriers to this transition

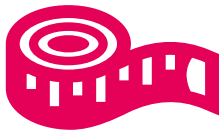
Renewable technologies had been installed on some farms, but more typically, farmers experienced challenges in pursuing this. Some farmers who did not have renewable energy sources on their farm, had researched it but did not feel it was viable, citing a series of core barriers relating to cost and bureaucratic processes:



The high costs associated with installing renewable energy was cited as a key barrier for farmers in the short and long term. Farmers felt that the agricultural sector as a whole needs to be considering renewables and therefore issues around cost and restrictions e.g., number of solar panels farms can install are impacting the potential for industry-wide change.



The cost burden was particularly significant for small and very small farms, with farmers often struggling to keep up with the rising costs of energy prices and other wholesale materials, meaning they often did not have the funding to invest in renewable technologies without additional financial support. They felt that upfront costs for installation of solar panels priced many farms out of the renewable energy market. They also felt it would take a long time to see any return in investment from renewable energy sources.



Red tape, particularly around the initial set-up, discouraged investment in renewables. Farmers who had already installed some renewable technologies, for example, solar panels, or those who had researched what would be required described the current processes as challenging, including **complex paperwork and stringent grant conditions. They highlighted the need for less bureaucratic, and more accessible support systems**

> *We put solar panels in good few years back, but we were restricted in the number we could put in by NIE [Networks].*
> **Dairy farm, Tyrone**

> *We have thought of putting in solar panels, it's something I've toyed with.....but it would be a long time before I would see any return.*
> **Beef farm, Armagh**

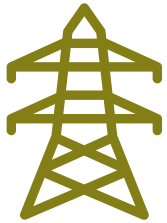
Despite a strong appetite for renewable technologies, there are a number of perceived barriers to this transition

In addition to cost and bureaucratic processes, farmers experienced challenges associated with a lack of information and inadequate infrastructure:



Farmers felt there was **a lack of information on available financial support and grants.** They felt there was little information available to understand the processes or requirements for installing renewable technologies, and this led farmers to perform online searches for general information. **They identified a need for clear, tailored and jargon-free information on renewable technologies.**

> *Simplify all the jargon for renewables. There's so many random words and stuff and they're just throwing figures at you...but I want to know if I install this [technology], it's going to be XYZ [cost] and it's going to be paid off in how many years.*
> **Dairy farm, Antrim**



In addition to financial constraints, **farmers highlighted the pressure on the electricity grid, and a lack of availability within the system to allow new grid connections**. This was frustrating for farmers who wanted to make the investment to install technologies such as solar panels. Farmers highlighted that investment in infrastructure was required to address the 'backlog' of grid connections.

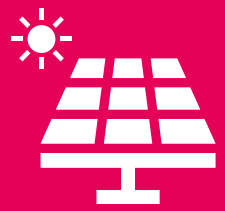
> *[We are] saturated all around us, there's no space for a connection... there's a bit of a backlog with grid connections... we didn't get onto that gold mine just yet.*
> **Dairy farm, Tyrone**



[On the bureaucratic challenges of installing renewables] You have to go on your hands and knees begging to spend your own money to provide your own electricity.

Dairy farm, Antrim

Farmers' Case Study 5: Bob*



Bob runs a small dairy operation in County Down. He has renewable technology on his farm and expressed interest in increasing his energy efficiency by adding more solar panels to his premises.

He contacted NIE Networks to upgrade his supply but had a poor experience – describing **installation delays**, **poor communication from NIE Networks, and an unexpected installation cost increase – despite having already paid a deposit.**

**Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.*

The increase in prices of energy and trying to be energy efficient were the key driving forces behind why the farmer invested in the renewable technology

Well, that was part of the reason for putting the solar panels in was to try and control those prices. So yes, it's always something to pay attention to…about 40% of [our] electricity is now being produced by the solar panels.

When he contacted NIE Networks about installing more solar panels, he stated that the deposit was paid, with the work expected to occur in ten months. He was extremely frustrated when they re-costed the planned work which ended up significantly more expensive than the quote he had received at the start of the upgrade.

We added a solar [panel] system two years ago now and we had to upgrade our supply to put the size of solar I wanted it on. I got a quote from them [NIE Networks]. I paid the deposit with an expected term of works of about 10 months. After 10 and a half months they came back with a revised estimate that was £7,500 more than the original one……It was because there was more than 12 months between them quoting the first time and the work being done. And I pointed out that I'd paid a deposit and it wasn't my fault that it took them longer to come. [They were] not interested. That's just the way it is.

The farmer also shared that he struggled to get in contact with NIE Networks about the upgrade and that the process for getting the connection improved was slow and stressful.

Well, they're certainly expensive if you go to get anything done and they're slow and they're very difficult to communicate with…

VIEWS ON SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATION

05

Awareness of financial support was low, but there was a desire for more information

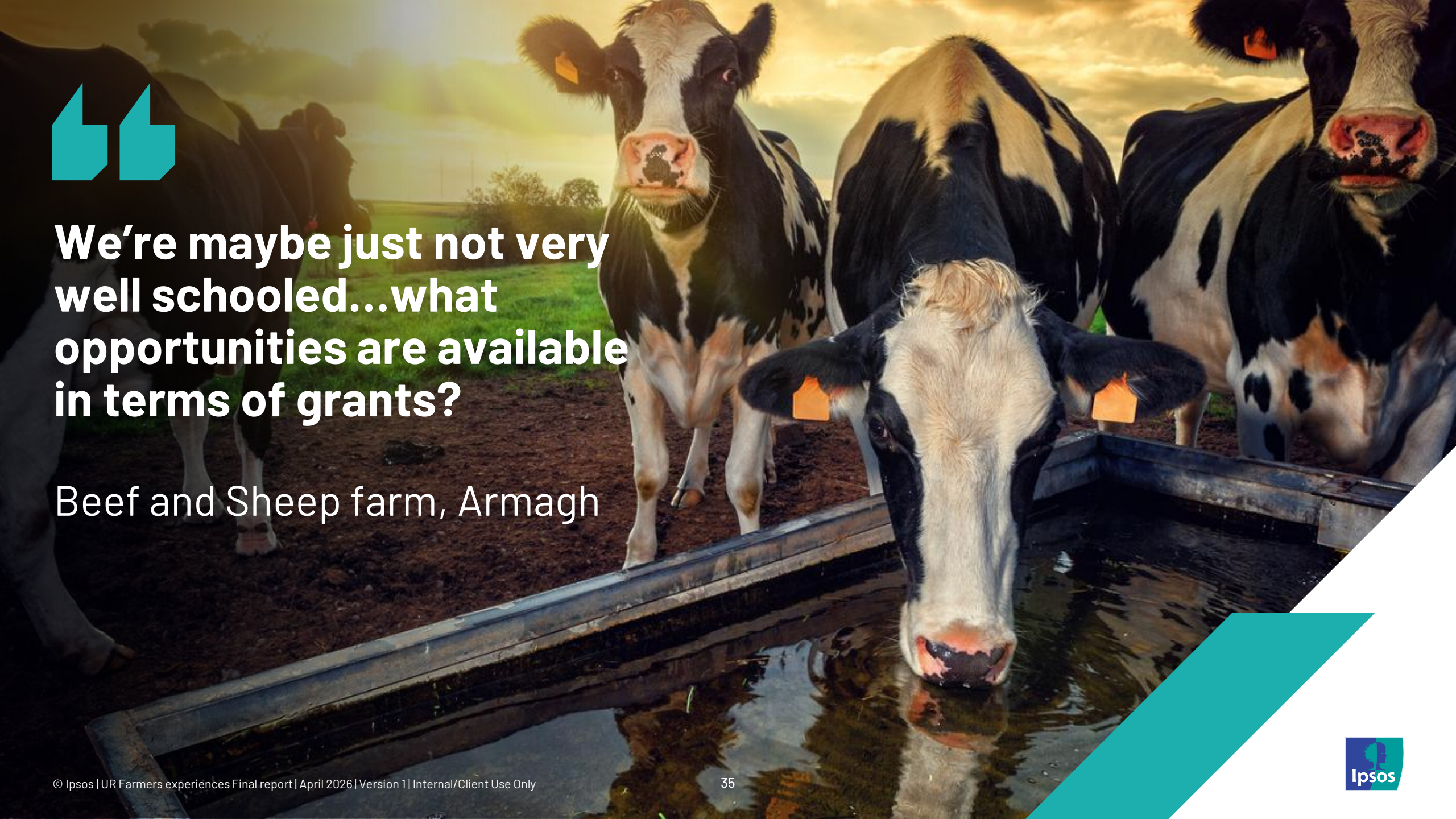
While spontaneous awareness of available financial support for farmers was low, when prompted about specific support, some farmers recognised the Farm Support and Development Programme and Sustainable Agriculture programmes. They were, however, not able to discuss in detail what this specific support offered. For general advice and support, they would reach out to the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) or Rural Support NI alongside their own online desk research. Some also mentioned a small winter grant provided by the farmer's charity RABI and Farm Improvement Grants.

Farmers cited Government and particularly the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) as a potential source of information they would look to, with some wanting more information on support from Government.

Farmers wanted to see more information on how to save water, reduce energy bills, and install renewables – and felt this should be more easily available. When asked who should provide this information, farmers were broadly split: some believed an independent body who understands the farming sector would be best placed to offer this support - citing UFU as an example – others felt this was the responsibility of NIE Networks, NI Water and individual energy suppliers (where applicable).

> *It's a mixture of advice and they would say they would point you in the right direction... I think they're [Rural Support NI] technically a charity.*
> **Dairy farm, Tyrone**

> *I think [if we] got more knowledge on ways to maybe save energy and water to decrease your bills, maybe some tips or advice on that... general information that would help you save water and things like that would be good.*
>
> **Beef and Sheep farm, Antrim**



We're maybe just not very well schooled…what opportunities are available in terms of grants?

Beef and Sheep farm, Armagh

Farmers' Case Study 6: Jane*



Jane runs a beef and sheep farm in County Armagh with her partner. She has experienced **challenges trying to access support for her farm** and **did not know where to go to get information on areas such as renewable technology.**

She submitted an application for a piece of equipment for the farm, through the Rural Development scheme – but the application was denied because she forgot to attach the quoted amount. She was extremely frustrated that there was a lack of support from the scheme to help her address the error.

**Please note that pseudonyms have been used to maintain confidentiality.*

Jane felt there was limited awareness and a lack of clear direction on available grants or advice for energy/renewables.



We're members of the Ulster Farmers Union. I know they're very good. But again...Are they really reaching out to their farmers with things like this [renewables]?



She wanted to see organisations like farmers unions do more to proactively support farmers like her to install renewable technologies on their farm.

I don't really know who I'm looking for support from, but maybe the likes of the Farmers Union or something telling their members, if this [support] is available... like you should be doing solar panels, you should be using hybrid vehicles, you should be doing this, something the other.

She suggested that the lack of knowledge around key areas such as the cost of getting these technologies installed was a key barrier for her.

You know, can we really afford to be putting solar panels on? Because the upfront cost or something like that is too much. Yeah, nobody knows.

Jane recalled a negative experience she had when applying for the Rural Development Support Scheme, saying that the application was denied because she forgot to attach the quote which she had to hand. She would have liked to have seen a more flexible approach taken – rather than rejecting it outright.



We applied for a grant for a piece of equipment for his work [on the farm]. It was like the Rural Development scheme. And I spent a lot of time in that application. The support is not there... I knew what to write, I knew what I was doing. And then they turned us down because they said we didn't attach the quotes that we asked for. Even though I went and got the quotes, I thought I attached them. It was a simple thing. They could have reached out and said, just, you didn't .... And they just cut us off and they didn't give us a chance.

Farmers need clear, accessible information about renewables and financial support

Farmers require clear but comprehensive information about available support, particularly for renewable technologies and infrastructure upgrades. They specifically need:

- Clear cost breakdowns without technical jargon
- Guidance on suitable renewable options for their farms (solar panels, hybrid vehicles, wind turbines)
- Details of relevant financial incentives and grants

Farmers also expressed the need for grants and subsidies to offset costs related to energy, infrastructure, and farm operations. Alongside these, many farmers also identified smaller scale, practical support measures that would help them transition to renewables, including energy tariff discounts for on-site renewable technology. Financial support to help farmers when facing financial difficulties (such as a winter relief fund) would also be welcomed. Those who ran small or very small farms were more likely to express a need for financial support, citing the impact of rising costs.



General advice is always useful. Information is always useful.....just as long as there's an availability of it.
Dairy farm, Tyrone

Farmers expected improved communication, sector expertise and collaborative support

Farmers generally expected utility providers – NI Water and individual energy suppliers – to offer improved communication from the outset, viewing this as key to customer satisfaction.

Across both energy and water, farmers expected staff dealing with farmers to understand the farming sector and its specific utility challenges. However, they felt this level of understanding varied across the sector and some felt the utility sector's knowledge of farming dropped over the years.

Beyond this, farmers felt that multiple organisations should share responsibility for providing information on available support. Farmers expect the UFU, DAERA and utility providers to deliver enhanced communication and tailored support. This collaborative approach would enable farms to reduce costs, improve energy efficiency and adopt sustainable energy practices.

Farmers' wider suggestions on providing support and information included:

- A 'one-stop shop' for clear and targeted support – highlighting a need for more accessible and practical guidance.
- Independent advisors or on-farm advisors were also raised as a source of tailored hands-on support.



Multiple communication channels would meet farmers' needs, however, personal communication was valued

Farmers frequently discussed challenges in reaching the 'right person' when contacting NIE Networks, NI Water or individual energy suppliers, and frustrations with staff who do not understand their need or their issues. Despite this, they still saw telephone communication as their preferred channel, as they favoured personal contact over chatbots and livechats. They described five core communication channels to reach, or be reached by, utilities; or to access wider information on available support:



Telephone contact was considered the gold standard as it is personal and meets the needs of busy farmers / older farming customers



Online information via websites (NIE Networks, utilities providers, UFU) was considered accessible



Social media was helpful to communicate issues around outages and available support



Account managers or farm advisors who understand key issues in the farming sector would be valued



Email was helpful for an overview of information on available support

> *I think primarily [organisations] should target farmers and basically send information directly to farmers....send out a mailshot, outline exactly what's available and how they can help your business.*
> **Sheep farm, Antrim**

> *[It's] impossible to get to speak to anyone. When you do get through to someone, it's impossible to get something sorted out because they don't know what they're talking about and somebody else has to ring you back and it never happens.*
> **Dairy and Barley farm, Tyrone**

CONCLUSIONS

06

KEY THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are aimed at the Utility Regulator and wider organisations and bodies operating in the utility sector in NI, and are based primarily on customer feedback from farmers. We have not triangulated this data with specific policy reviews or stakeholder engagement. Where they are related to specific policies or proposing policy changes, they act as a starting point for discussion, rather than a final recommendation.



High energy costs in addition to wider increases in costs for materials and equipment is impacting farmers, who can do little to pass on costs to their customers. Small and very small farmers are more likely to feel the impact of rising costs. Farmers have reluctantly accepted higher energy costs and consequently are less able to invest in new equipment or renewable technologies



There is a significant knowledge gap around financial support, including grants, particularly for renewable technologies. This impacts on a farm's ability to grow their business and improve energy efficiency. Awareness of available financial support was low, yet farmers highlighted a need for clear, accessible information on financial programmes and renewable energy support. Farmers expect to receive this information from a range of organisations including the UFU, DAERA and individual utility suppliers.

Recommendation 1

1a. UR may consider working with Government departments and wider relevant bodies to raise awareness of existing support schemes, signposting farmers to clear, accessible information on available financial supports, including for renewables.

This could be strengthened by utilising any additional relevant networks such as UFU and Rural Support NI.

1b. Additional standalone research could be commissioned to understand how to best raise awareness on existing support programmes.

KEY THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Low levels of complaint or switching of suppliers does not necessarily indicate satisfaction, but is reflective of farmers' perceptions that there is a small energy market in Northern Ireland; and that they lack control regarding choice of utility suppliers.

Recommendation 2

2a. The Utility Regulator could work with representative or membership organisations in the sector (such as UFU) to improve awareness of available energy supplier options. This could encourage those who are hesitant but interested in switching electricity supplier to explore alternative suppliers.

2b. Additional qualitative research could also be conducted to understand existing barriers, facilitators and wider factors that may encourage switching.



Tailored customer service and good communication, rather than price, are the primary drivers of satisfaction. While rising costs are a key challenge, farmers expressed a need for more proactive engagement from providers. Farmers are generally satisfied with the service they receive from NIE Networks, provided there is clear communication and any issues are resolved quickly. Experiences with NI Water varied and could be improved through proactive communication from the provider. Administrative errors such as metering and billing issues are a pain point which frustrated farmers, who felt that more could be done by NI Water and energy suppliers to communicate any metering and billing anomalies before they received a higher-than-expected bill.

Recommendation 3

3a. Utility providers – NI Water and individual energy suppliers - could consider where they could offer **a dedicated customer service to farmers**. This could be through dedicated farm teams within customer contact centres or account managers.

3b. Proactive communication should happen as standard. This includes giving customers advance notice of key contract milestones, such as the end of a contract, and sharing tailored updates about renewable energy initiatives. Additionally, suppliers could send personalised check-ins prior to billing if meter anomalies arise, such as those caused by a potential leak.

KEY THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Water is a critical resource, and things can go wrong quickly if there is an interruption to water supply. There can be serious consequences to animal welfare, and the overall farm operation if interruption to water supply is prolonged. Farmers felt that upgrades were needed to future-proof the aging water system to meet the existing high demand, and to protect against the effects of extreme weather. While all farmers expressed a strong reliance on water, those who used a private water source (such as boreholes) were vulnerable to any small interruptions to their own water supply. As extracting water from boreholes requires use of an electric pump, farmers using their own private water supply could be particularly vulnerable, as any power outages would prevent them from using water from these sources.



Systemic infrastructure issues act as a ceiling on progress and positive change (in particular for renewables). Major upgrades to the water and energy networks are needed for the sector. This sits alongside wider barriers or challenges for farmers to installing more renewable technology, such as high costs and a lack of information and awareness. Farmers who have pursued renewables have expressed frustrations at the complex and bureaucratic processes involved.

Recommendation 4

4a. As the impact of **prolonged water interruption can be significant for farmers**, **NI Water may wish to consider how this issue can be reflected in relevant Codes of Practice. Additionally, NI Water could consider developing specific requirements relating to the farming sector within relevant Codes of Practice.**

4b. In extreme cases where supply interruptions may exceed half a day, **NI Water could consider providing either an alternate water supply, or use of water storage equipment** for example a bowser or water tank.

Recommendation 5

5a. NI Water and NIE Networks should communicate with farmers about upcoming infrastructure improvements through relevant channels, for example, NI Water, NIE Networks, UR, DAERA and UFU websites, and as part of any regular customer communications e.g., via billing or maintenance updates.

5b. The findings of this report suggest challenges for farmers relating to establishing renewable energy connections**. NIE Networks and relevant bodies may consider these issues in relation to potential expansion of the electricity network. When network expansion does occur, farmers should also be notified via the relevant channels to encourage uptake of renewable technologies.**

KEY THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key driver for customer satisfaction with NIE Networks, NI Water and individual energy providers was the delivery of their core responsibilities. Farmers expected an uninterrupted and reliable supply of both water and electricity. Should issues arise, they expected utility providers to deal with these issues promptly to restore their water or energy supply as soon as possible. More serious issues such as supply interruptions due to weather events are understood as they are usually not in NIE Networks or the providers' control and farmers felt these issues were generally resolved in a timely manner.

Recommendation 6

6a. Utility providers (NIE Networks, NI Water and individual energy suppliers) should aim to meet customer expectations in relation to water and energy supply and maintain standards to ensure timely responses to any interruptions to supply for example, through damage to infrastructure, water or power outages, or leaks/flooding.

6b. Providers could consider reviewing patterns in service disruption and collect individual feedback from farmers about specific cases to better understand why these interruptions may occur.

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